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THE ART OF THE PRESENT.

THERE is no more unerring token of true genius, than the grasp it takes of the things of its own time. When our poet said, "Act, act in the living present," he spoke to the artist as well as to the man, and when Lowell said so beautifully in one of his late lectures, "The man who dwells in the past, is a dead man; he who dwells in the future, a man yet unborn; he who lives in the present, is the only one who has a genuine existence," he uttered a truth which every artist who has earned a place in the reverence of mankind has demonstrated by his life and works.

We shall not, for the thousandth time, call up the illustrious workers of the past, as witnesses to testify that what we say is true. Every artist who is capable of being animated by the inspirations of to-day, will need no warning or advice as to his choice of subject; while the unhappy wanderers who seek with tears a sunk Atlantis of Art, where *were* gathered all conceivable perfections, may be left to their happy dreams—they are harmless, at least. And, in fact, it is scarcely upon those who now are ranked as artists, that we, or any other, can exert a decided influence—but rather we must direct our efforts to public taste, which shall, by a better tone and a higher demand, call forth from those who are just entering the course, greater earnestness and keener seeking for the good that lies around us.

We are well aware that this is no age of great artistic leanings—that Art has little hold on its internal life, and little sympathy with its external appearances—and, therefore, it cares little for the Artist, and less for the artistic, in that which surrounds the matter-of-fact life. The indifference thus shown to Art, is responded to by it in turn, and the result is a gradually increasing separation; so that men now consider Art as a thing which has no relation to their every-day existences, but which should be kept apart and visited rarely, and when the mind is idle and listless. We have an impression that this is all wrong—that the first use of Art, be it painting, music, sculpture, or architecture, is to mingle with and mollify all the harshnesses of the working world. We find it to be the

case with beauty in the operations of Nature, and why should it be different with ours?

The fact is, that there is no economy in the present life of the race—enjoyments of the noblest kind are showered unheeded upon us; and, under the false notion of utility to which we have devoted ourselves, we go about like men who should search the valleys of Golconda for material to build a stone wall. The gold of the sunlight is forgotten in the warmth which makes the crops spring up—the majesty of the oak, the solemnity of the pine, are forgotten in the consideration that they are good timber for shipbuilding—the sod is searched for the mushroom and truffle oftener than for the violet and daisy—and the bobolink is less thought of in his days of song and beauty of plumage, than as the rice-bird of the autumn, he is cared for by the gourmand.

This is worse than idle—we need not enjoy the spring sunlight less, because it draws the corn blades up from the moist earth—we may enjoy the oak shade just as much, for all that the tree is destined to frame some gallant ship—and, even while searching for the coveted fungus, we might delight the soul with the veined blue of the violet. We need not cease to see, because we *must* eat, or forget the lily of the field, because we must clothe ourselves. If we cared more for the wonderful and beautiful habitation in which Nature has placed us all, we should at once feel more the meanness of those which we build for ourselves, and care less for the things which are, after all, only manifestations of pride and self-consequence; but, as we live now, in the care for what we shall eat and drink, and wherewithal we shall be clothed, we have mainly forgotten everything else, and the grand result of all our labors is, that we work the better life into the means of supporting the baser. It is unfortunate, and still more so, that men do all this without being conscious that they could do any otherwise.

The only thing to be done is, that the few who realize the true order of enjoyment in life, should devote themselves, as they best may, to making known to their fellow-men that their purest and most intense delights are neglected, and in great

danger of being lost. Art should do this, but does not to any great extent, simply because it stands aloof from the present life, and disclaims any sympathy with these angular matter-of-fact times. We are as well aware as it is possible to be, that this is not an age in which the beautiful is much cared for or often seen—that all that we do is full of things that jar and produce discord perpetually: but this hard, angular and grovelling age, if you consider it so, has got to be worked into something beautiful, and graceful, and harmonious, or else Art has no utility, and the bread and butter school of philosophers must rule the world of thought and feeling. Art must take the age with all its faults—and, if it cannot cure them, it must adopt and do its best to veil them. At any rate, with and for the present, it must work, and the sooner it is at it the better, for, day by day, the material world grows heavier, and the spiritual lighter and less effective, wherever the spiritual qualities of Art are not brought into operation.

This will never be effected by the artist withdrawing himself from us, or by his drowsing of Arcadia, and fancying some glorious lands or times where and when all was harmony. His function is not to tell us of things past or to come, but to search out and demonstrate the worth of the present moment and this very place. Why should he mock our faith in humanity by telling us of heroism of days gone by, or beggar our own land by an ostentatious parade of what another clime can furnish! When, weary of what is hollow and ugly, we may turn to Art to cheer us with its ideals, what boots it to tell us of Leonidas or the Bloom-time of Greece! What consolation to find that all that is worthy is dead or out of our reach—that Life is indeed the hollow thing it seemed, and that there is no hope in the present time!

No! if Art have an use, it is, not to furnish us with phantasies, however beautiful, but to point out that which is beautiful and lovely in the things which are nearest us, teaching us to see for ourselves that Nature being always the same, and Humanity always the image of God, that in our day as well as in any other, and in our native village as well as in Sparta or Thebes, are worth and beauty, and the seal of Divinity

in His works, to be found by those who will use their eyes and open their hearts, that they may understand the sign in which it is written. The Art of the Present is that which deals with the present—that of the past is dead—that of the future unborn. If the artist were what he should be, a reformer, a philanthropist, full of hope, and reverence, and love, he would be a man of his own times; if not, he may be what he pleases, there is not much for him to do. He may paint the past, fancy the future—anything but complain that Art is neglected and despised, since *his* Art is only a ghost or a phantasy—living men cannot grasp it or hold communion with it.

Reminiscences.

EXHIBITIONS AND ACADEMIES.

THE epoch of our annual exhibitions naturally suggests the recollection of the *first* artistic exposition in the United States, which took place in the memorable Hall of Independence, in May, 1795, under the direction of an ephemeral society with the quaint name of COLUMBIANUM. Their first document commences thus:—"An association of artists in America for the protection and encouragement of the Fine Arts. We, the undersigned, from an earnest desire to promote, to the utmost of our abilities, the Fine Arts, now in their infancy in America, mutually promise and agree to use our utmost efforts to establish a school or academy of architecture, sculpture, painting, &c., within the United States." Signed by thirty members, of whom fourteen were engravers and painters.

A small attempt was made to organize an Academy, by means of a number of broken statues, belonging to my father, saved from the wreck of his studio and the revolutionary movements. From these plasters, Jeremiah Paul and myself were the only draughtsmen; but a desire to study from the life promised a better attendance, and a fine athletic baker was chosen as a willing model; but, when we were all stationed at the surrounding desks, crayon in hand, and our young baker, though accustomed to some nudity in his bakery, found himself, as he stripped, the object of a dozen pair of scrutinizing eyes, he *hastily* gave up the display; and my father, that the young academicians should not be disappointed, partially disrobed himself, and thus served as the first academical model in America!

A great effort was made to get up an exhibition by contributions of old and new paintings, from Copley and West, down to the Peales, and landscapes by Loutherbourn and Groombridge. Four landscapes by Reinagle, were the chief ornaments of the walls, but were sent back to the artist, not finding a purchaser at a hundred dollars each, such was the low ebb of taste in the capital of America, with the boasted population of ninety thousand inhabitants—now 500,000. In the collection was a fine portrait of Mrs. Governor Mifflin, by Copley, for the hands of which, she told me, she sat twenty times. This tediousness of operation deterred many from sitting to

Copley. I have heard Vanderlyn fret that he could only get six sittings for the same purpose.

Philadelphia, then without a rival, imagined itself the Athens of America, but could scarcely support two portrait painters and one miniature painter. *Field* was only a bird of passage—went to Nova Scotia, adopted the surplice, and became a comfortable bishop; and the sculptor *Cerachi*, after making a bad bust of Washington, returned to France to conspire against Bonaparte. It may be worth remembering that the first enamel miniature painted in America was that of my father, and the second, William Bingham, painted by the elder *Birch*, who afterwards could only scrape a living by painting enamel breastpins for lady patrons; his son *Thomas*, until recently, enjoyed his humble life as a marine painter.

The erection of a new theatre triumphed in despite of the powerful opposition of Quakers, and was rendered attractive by a beautiful drop-scene, painted in London by Reinagle, the motto over the stage being, "We hold the *mirror* up to nature." The same taste dictated a motto for our exhibition, furnished by Joseph Hopkinson, "'Tis not in mortals to command success, but we'll do more—deserve it." Notwithstanding this, it was the only exhibition until the formation of the Pennsylvania Academy in 1805, of which I was the instigator and chief instrument, with much loss of money and time. The *Columbianum* died a natural death, by schisms, and chiefly the resignation, in a body, by eight of its members—Englishmen—occasioned by some republican sentiment uttered by an American. Indignant at this proceeding, I drew a caricature sketch of the retiring party; on submitting it to Mr. Trenchard, the engraver, he was amused with its point and humor, but recommended me to suppress it, with the kind advice never to indulge in satire so flattering to the vanity of the satirist, and so seldom productive of any good results. The satisfaction I have enjoyed from his benevolent advice is a sufficient excuse for presenting the anecdote to other artists. The hall, which had been neglected since the Declaration of Independence, after the exhibition, became my painting room. It is now renovated and consecrated by a gallery of American worthies, most of which were painted by my father—some by myself—and is daily visited with increasing veneration.

As connected with the subject of exhibitions and academies, I may be indulged in an episode to London, where, in 1802-3, I studied under the direction of Mr. West, who transferred to me the affection he had conceived for my father. After drawing from the antique in the Royal Academy, I was a candidate for admission to the life school; but a trick practiced on Mr. West deprived me of that favor. As a compensation, however, I united with other students, and procured the academy model for our private study; but we were obliged to discontinue it, from the mean idea of some of the academicians, that it was a species of opposition to them. Subsequently, under a more liberal construction, several private life academies have been established in London; and now in New York and Philadelphia, no difficulty is experienced in

procuring living models of men and women, whereas, in 1805, no female could be obtained here who would consent to serve before more than one artist. In Paris, I drew, with Vanderlyn, and another American, from one of the five models he employed to finish his beautiful picture of *Ariadne*. She reclined, with apparent composure, on her couch, until her breakfast was announced, when she rose, and covered herself with every indication of unaffected modesty, although our other American was angry that she could bear the scrutinizing gaze of three artists!

Among the sketches which decorated the gallery leading to Mr. West's painting room, I often admired the solemn grandeur of his *original* sketch of "Death on the Pale Horse," and could not forbear warmly praising it, with the hope that he would some day make a large picture from it. My commendations induced him to take this study with him to Paris, on his visit during the short peace of 1802, where it gained him great applause.

In 1803, when I was preparing to return to America, Mr. West made up his mind to embark with me, which induced me to remark, that although our country was too young adequately to remunerate him for his great historical works, yet by painting them, for *popular exhibition* in our different cities, I thought he might be fully compensated. Mild as was his temper, and pale his complexion, his countenance suddenly became flushed, and he replied—"I will thank you *never* to name that subject again!" His intention of coming to America was abandoned, by the advice of his physicians, who thought that the delicate health of Mr. West could not survive the shock of the voyage—and his picture of "Christ Healing the Sick," soon after, wrought a change in his sentiment. It was painted as a present to the Pennsylvania Hospital; but, before sending it off, he was induced to place it in the Exhibition of the British Institution, where it proved so attractive that the directors offered him the unprecedented price of three thousand guineas for it, which he thought it his duty to accept, and to paint a *repetition* of it, with some variations; which was done, and the hospital cleared twenty-five thousand dollars by its exhibition. These circumstances induced Mr. West to compose and execute in large his "Christ before Pilate," and to exhibit it on his own account. This having proved successful, he determined to paint his "Death on the Pale Horse;" but, unfortunately, instead of merely enlarging it, without alterations, he filled it up with new and odd conceits; and, painting it when his powers began to fail, disappointed every expectation, and lessened his reputation.

It was after this that Mr. Galt undertook to write the life of Mr. West—a work rendered ridiculous by the romantic and fabulous tales, gleaned from the family gossip. This same biographer had previously drawn himself into notice by affecting to patronize the Poet Bloomfield. When painting his portrait, I perceived that he was in delicate health, and learned from him that it was caused by close confinement at a desk, where his duty was to fill up papers for the imprisonment of unfortunate debtors (which also preyed upon his spirits) an office procured for him by Mr. Galt, and